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HEADLINE: Federal 'rent' sought to aid Utah schools

BYLINE: Jennifer Toomer-Cook Deseret Morning News

BODY:

Republicans running for Congress want federal officials to pay more than \$100 million in annual "rent" on untaxable federal lands -- and make their check out to Utah public schools.

Basically, they're pushing the APPLE initiative, unveiled by House Speaker Marty Stephens, R-Farr West, and Rep. Stephen Urquhart, R-St. George, two years ago.

APPLE, or the **Action Plan for Public Lands and Education**, hasn't made much progress in Washington. But, the candidates say, the issue is just beginning to ripen.

"We think (congressional colleagues) have ruminated long enough," Rep. Rob Bishop, running for re-election in Utah's 1st Congressional District, said in a Monday press conference. "We're not going to stop until it's a reality . . . but it's going to take time to convince people."

APPLE comes from a study showing Western states fall behind Eastern ones in **education** spending. Per-pupil spending growth in the East is more than double what it is in the West, leading to higher Western class sizes, according to the candidates.

The initiative says federal lands are the culprit. No Eastern state has more than 14 percent of its lands federally owned. But at least 27 percent of Western states' land is federally owned.

Two-thirds of Utah is federal land. Since it can't be developed or subjected to property tax, Utah is losing out, the candidates said.

So they propose hitting federal officials up for \$116 million a year as the "rent" America owes Utah, as sort of a payment in lieu of taxes. The money would come with no strings attached and go straight to Utah schools.

"(It's) not welfare for the West," Bishop said. "We're talking about the rent that is due."

The candidates also want to consolidate school trust lands and swap them for lands of greater value. U.S. Rep. Chris Cannon said he'll lead the charge, if elected to a fifth, two-year term.

"To do this, we're going to have to work as a team" between the governor's office and the congressional delegation, Cannon said.

So far, nine of 12 Western states have pledged support for the initiative, Urquhart said. The main effort now is to get Washington, California and Colorado on board. Then, supporters hope to get grass-roots support of the idea and spur Congress into action.

"It's an emerging process," Urquhart said. "This is something that truly has been building at the state level, it's something that's been building at the grass-roots level, and it's a natural time for it to spring on the national scene."

He and Stephens had hoped the initiative would become a presidential election issue. But other pressing matters, such as the war in Iraq, took center stage instead.

The APPLE initiative is supported by several Utah **education** groups and Democrats.

"The Democratic Party is certainly in support and in favor of Utah getting its fair share of funding" and payment in lieu of taxes, which is "an issue that's been worked on a very long time," Democratic Party chairman Donald Dunn said. "I would ask Chris Cannon why he hasn't done anything about it (yet)."

Supporters question whether APPLE can come through anytime soon.

"We need more immediate help than anything the APPLE initiative is going to be able to bring to us," said Pat Rusk, president of the Utah **Education** Association, which has had a seat on the APPLE steering committee.

Democratic Rep. Jim Matheson, who seeks a third term in the 2nd Congressional District, agrees APPLE "will take some very heavy lifting," considering it would benefit relatively few children in sparsely populated Western states and "the deficits the federal government is facing."

"But," he added, "that doesn't mean we shouldn't try." Contributing: Bob Bernick Jr.
E-mail: jtcook@desnews.com